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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 YEREVAN 002053

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [TBIO](#) [SENV](#) [ECON](#) [EAGR](#) [EAID](#) [PREL](#) [AMED](#) [AM](#) [WHO](#)

SUBJECT: ARMENIA: RESPONSE TO AVIAN AND PANDEMIC INFLUENZA
REQUEST FOR INFORMATION

REF: A) STATE 206992 B) YEREVAN 1562 C) YEREVAN 1730

Classified By: Amb. John Evans for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) Armenia is ill-prepared to respond to an avian influenza (AI) outbreak in either the animal or the human population. There is no active surveillance system in place and the GOAM currently lacks basic diagnostic capacity to evaluate any potential AI outbreak. There is, however, some scientific equipment and expertise available that could be adapted to respond to the AI threat. The GOAM recognizes the nature of the AI threat, is likely to cooperate with the international community and is open to both bilateral and multilateral assistance. This cable presents a brief summary of the poultry sector in Armenia in paragraph 2 and responds to ref A questions in paragraph 3. End Summary.

BACKGROUND

2. (SBU) From November 12 to 19, at the GOAM's request, USAID sponsored poultry expert Dr. Elizabeth Krushinskie to assess preparedness to combat AI in the agricultural sector. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) considers Armenia to be a high-risk country for AI because of bird migratory patterns. According to Krushinskie, Armenia's vulnerability is limited because there are few live bird markets in Armenia and the domestic poultry industry is relatively small. Commercial poultry farmers in Armenia raise chickens in enclosures so they do not come into contact with wild birds. Backyard chicken farmers often allow their birds to roam outdoors but generally do not allow chickens, pigs and other livestock to enter their homes. The Minister of Agriculture told us that 75 percent of domestic poultry in Armenia, approximately seven to eight million birds, is raised for personal consumption on backyard farms. The remaining 25 percent is raised on one of six commercial poultry farms. The Ministry estimates that 50 percent of chicken consumed in Armenia is imported, primarily from the U.S. and South America. In response to the AI threat, the Ministry has banned poultry imports from Russia, Turkey, Romania, Iran and Southeast Asia. The Ministry of Environment has banned wild bird hunting, but local hunters routinely violate the ban. Post's point of contact on avian flu is Economic Affairs Officer Elizabeth Pelletreau who can be reached at PelletreauEX@state.gov or via telephone at (347-10) 467-000 ext. 4402.

3. (C) Post's responses to the questions in ref A follow:

PREPAREDNESS/COMMUNICATION

Q. Does the Government have a preparedness plan/strategy for preventing avian flu from becoming a pandemic and containing a pandemic once it occurs? If the country has a strategy, how capable is it of implementing it?

A. The Armenian Ministry of Health has taken the lead on drafting a National Preparedness Plan, with other Ministries, including the Ministry of Agriculture, tasked to draft annexes for their specific area. In October, a representative from the Ministry of Health traveled to Copenhagen to review the Preparedness Plan with a group of World Health Organization (WHO) experts. The plan provides a progressive response depending on the nature of the threat and includes provisions for the ban of poultry sales, mass exterminations of birds in infected areas, limits on travel and tourism, stockpiling of antiviral medication and banning of public events. The plan does not discuss compensation for farmers if there is a need to cull local flocks. The Ministry of Agriculture is developing a specific agricultural plan with the FAO, but this plan is significantly less well developed than the Ministry of Health's plan. The greatest constraint on implementation of the National Preparedness Plan, which the Ministry of Health expects will be approved in the near future, will likely be a lack of financial resources. Per ref A, copies of both plans have been sent via unclassified e-mail to Armenia Desk Officer Kami Witmer,

OES Senior Health Advisor Dr. Daniel Singer, Policy Advisor Rebecca Daley and INR Senior Analyst Raymond Lester.

Q. How truthful will the government be in reporting the scope of any disease outbreak among people? Among animals? What incentives could be offered that would likely result in more transparency?

A. The GOAM will likely cooperate with the WHO and World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) in the event of an outbreak among either humans or animals. Diagnostic capacity in Armenia, however, remains extremely limited. The Armenian press has repeatedly quoted representatives from the Ministries of Health and Agriculture reassuring the general public that there is no avian flu in Armenia, but no active surveillance or diagnostic testing is being done to support that claim. The GOAM has a passive surveillance system whereby farmers and hunters are encouraged to report dead birds. When dead birds are found, the GOAM collects live birds from the same area for observation assuming that if the disease has spread, the birds under observation will also die. The GOAM does not have the capacity to test for H5N1 and rural inspectors would need training on how to collect and transport samples before any active surveillance system is put in place. International assistance to develop an active surveillance system and diagnostic capacity would allow the GOAM to collect reliable data to share with the international community. Should there be an avian flu outbreak, there will also be a need to convince the GOAM to allocate funding to support culling and compensation efforts.

Q. Where does preparing for an avian flu human pandemic rank among government priorities? Who and what would most influence the country to give the issue a higher priority? Who is the key "go-to" person, office or department for USG officials to engage on this issue?

A. The Ministries of Agriculture and Health place a high priority on preparing for an AI outbreak. It is not clear whether the Ministry of Finance is willing, or able, to provide the necessary financial resources to ensure an appropriate response. The following Ministries sit on an inter-ministerial AI task force: Agriculture, Health, Environment, Foreign Affairs, Territorial Administration and the Department for Emergency Situations. The head of the task force, and key "go-to" person, is Deputy Minister of Agriculture Levon Rukhkian. Former Chief of Public Health and Sanitation at the Ministry of Health, Prof. Vladimir Davidyants has been our key contact for AI and human health issues. As of November 21, Davidyants was reassigned to the National Institute of Health. His replacement, Artyom Vanyan, will likely become our new key contact within the Ministry of Health.

Q. Have national laws been reviewed to ensure that they are consistent with the international health regulations and do not pose barriers to avian influenza detection, reporting, containment, or response?

A. To the best of our knowledge, there has been no such review. According to a representative from the Ministry of Health, many of Armenia's health laws are out-of-date and the Ministry has drafted a new consolidated public health law which it hopes will be adopted in the next six to eight months.

Q. Is the host country already working with international organization or other countries on the avian flu issue? Are government leaders likely to ask for assistance from the U.S. or other countries? Would government leaders be receptive to messages from U.S. leaders through a bilateral approach, at a multilateral forum such as the UN (WHO, FAO, etc.) or through bilateral contacts by a third country? What would the country want from the U.S. in return for its efforts?

A. The Ministry of Health is collaborating with the WHO on a National Preparedness Plan. Prior to the WHO review, the Ministry of Health also requested that the USG provide a Centers for Disease Control (CDC) expert to review the plan (refs B and C). The Ministry of Agriculture is working with the FAO. Due to funding constraints, however, FAO programming on this issue has been, and is likely to be, extremely limited. According to the FAO country representative, the FAO has allocated USD 400,000 to support avian flu preparedness for 13 countries in the region. The European Commission (EC) is supporting a food safety project at the Ministry of Agriculture and the project coordinator says that the EC might be able to reallocate funding to combat AI as well.

At the Ministry of Agriculture's request, USAID sponsored poultry expert Dr. Elizabeth Krushinskie to assess preparedness within the agricultural sector. She traveled in Armenia from November 12-19. The Ministry of Agriculture was extremely cooperative and facilitated Krushinskie's visits to local poultry farms, regional veterinary centers and two

national labs. The GOAM is likely to want both technical and financial assistance from the USG to implement Krushinskie's recommendations. The Ministry of Agriculture has requested bilateral support for laboratory equipment from the U.S. and Germany and appears to be open to working on both a bilateral and multilateral basis.

Q. Does the country currently administer annual flu shots? If not, might it consider doing so? What is the production capability for human influenza vaccines in country?

A. The GOAM does not regularly administer annual human flu shots and it is difficult and costly to obtain annual flu vaccines on the local market. There is no local vaccine production in Armenia and all vaccines are imported either from Europe or Russia. In response to the avian flu threat, the GOAM has ordered 55,000 doses of vaccine from the German pharmaceutical company Solvay and expects delivery on December 15. The GOAM plans to provide these vaccines to people who work in poultry farms and to villages which are on bird migration routes. According to representative from the Ministry of Health Prof. Vladimir Davidyants, there is a shortage of this year's flu vaccine on the international market. Davidyants told us the GOAM would be willing to purchase and distribute additional human flu vaccines if necessary. He explained that there is a network of polyclinics throughout the country and said that distribution would be simple if vaccines were available. The Embassy Health Unit conducted an informal survey assessing availability of annual human flu vaccines in Yerevan and discovered that the annual flu vaccine was not available in a number of hospitals and when the vaccine was available it was often prohibitively expensive costing more than an average month's wages for a single shot.

Q. Does the country produce the influenza vaccine for poultry and if so, how much? If the country is developing an H5N1 vaccine, where is it in production and testing? any licensing issues? Is there a liability shield for foreign makers/donors of vaccines? If not, any prospects of one being enacted?

A. Armenia does not produce and is not developing a poultry vaccine. Foot-and-mouth vaccine is produced locally and Armenia has equipment and technical experts who would likely be capable of producing vaccine if needed. We have no information about a liability shield for foreign makers/donors of vaccines, but according to representatives from UNICEF and USAID, there has never been a lawsuit against an international aid agency concerning vaccines.

Q. How well informed is the population about the avian flu threat and about measures they should take to mitigate the threat? What mechanisms are available for providing additional information to the population, particularly in rural areas and how effective are these measures?

A. The general public is highly aware of AI, but poorly informed. Basic food safety standards are low and public consumption of poultry has decreased by 25 percent or more over the past few months. The GOAM has distributed 5,000 posters, based on information provided by USDA, detailing ways to limit the spread of AI. The impact of this campaign, however, remains unclear. Local television stations have aired shows about AI on at least two occasions, but the thrust of this programming and the public announcements made by the Ministries of Health and Agriculture has been to reassure the public that there is no avian flu in Armenia. Candid and accurate television programming and a public information campaign including newspapers and posters would be two ways to educate the Armenia public about AI and general food safety. It would also be helpful to teach regional representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture how to conduct local-level training for farmers on food safety, AI and proper slaughter and dressing techniques.

SURVEILLANCE/DETECTION

Q. How capable are the medical and agriculture sector of detecting a new strain of influenza among people or animal respectively? How long might it take for cases to be properly diagnosed given other endemic diseases? Can influenza viruses be subtyped in the country, if so, by who, and if not where are they sent? Does the country send samples to a WHO/EU/U.S. reference laboratory?

A. Armenia has no capability to detect new strains of influenza among either people or animals. The GOAM has an ELISA testing unit, but when USAID-sponsored poultry expert Krushinskie visited the lab where it is located, the unit was not attached to a computer, lacked appropriate lenses for testing and the lab staff had not been properly trained on how to use the equipment. The GOAM also has a Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) unit, but Krushinskie said the unit was old and could not be used to test for AI. The Veterinary

Animal Breeding Research Center, according to Krushinskie, might be able to test for avian flu using agar gel immunodiffusion (AGID) testing. According to Krushinskie the scientists at the center are well trained and well versed with AGID and virus isolation techniques. Furthermore, the scientists at this lab are producing vaccine for foot-and-mouth disease and have some equipment which could be used for AI diagnostic testing. Armenia particularly needs increased diagnostic capacity because exotic Newcastle disease is endemic and the GOAM has no way to distinguish bird deaths caused by exotic Newcastle from bird deaths caused by avian flu. The GOAM does not currently send samples abroad. Deputy Minister of Agriculture Rukhkian told us the GOAM would be willing to send samples to the Vladimir Laboratory south of Moscow or to the Weybridge Laboratory in the U.K., but they are not currently in contact with either lab and it is not clear that they have the capacity to safely collect or transport samples.

Q. What are the critical gaps that need to be filled in order to enhance the country's disease detection and outbreak response capabilities? What is the country's greatest need in this area from the U.S. or international organizations?

A. USAID-supported poultry expert Krushinskie recommends the following immediate, stop-gap measures to improve surveillance and detection capability. Armenia needs: protective clothing for poultry farm inspectors; training and supplies for sample collection and shipment, including cold shipment, to international laboratories; field screening rapid antigen detection kits; reagents, disposable supplies and training to enhance in-country AGID testing capacity; data base management supplies and training so that samples are tracked and that inspectors can identify where positive samples were collected; and funding to support a public awareness campaign focused on food safety, ways to limit the spread of avian flu and proper techniques for killing and dressing wild birds and chickens in a backyard setting. In addition to these immediate measures, Krushinskie is drafting a report based on her November 12-19 rapid assessment detailing how best to improve preparedness within the agricultural sector. We expect to receive Krushinskie's report by the end of November and will share it with Washington as soon as it is available.

RESPONSE/CONTAINMENT

Q. Does the country have a stockpile of medications, particularly of antivirals and if so how much? If some has been ordered, how much and when is it expected?

A. The GOAM has sufficient Tamiflu at the Yerevan Infectious Disease Hospital to treat twenty people. The Tamiflu was donated by members of the Argentinean-Armenia Diaspora. It is not clear if the GOAM plans to purchase additional stocks. According to the Ministry of Health, there are no other stockpiles of Tamiflu or antivirals in Armenia. Tamiflu is not available on the local market.

Q. Does the country have a stockpile of pre-positioned personal protective gear?

A. The Ministry of Agriculture has no protective gear in stock and agricultural inspectors do not wear protective clothing when visiting area farms. Visiting poultry expert Krushinskie donated 14 coveralls with boots to USDA for its use when visiting farms. According to the Armenian Ministry of Health, health care workers have standard protective masks and gowns which they used during regular annual flu outbreaks, but they do not have special protective gear for any potential avian flu outbreak.

Q. What is the rapid response capacity for animal and human outbreaks? Are guidelines in place for the culling and vaccination of birds, disinfecting of facilities and limitations on animal movement?

A. The rapid response capacity is minimal. There are no specific guidelines for culling and vaccinating birds, disinfecting facilities or limiting animal movement. The National Preparedness Plan does discuss culling as an option but does not provide any detail about how it will be done and does not make any provision for compensating affected farmers. There is also a lack of basic supplies, such as protective equipment, plastic bags and duct tape in rural areas.

Q. How willing and capable is the government of imposing quarantines and social distancing measures (closing schools, public gatherings, mass transit)? Would its military enforce quarantines?

A. The Ministry of Health has the authority to close public facilities in the event of an outbreak. In 1992 the Ministry of Health delayed the opening of public schools for two weeks

in order to limit the spread of annual human influenza and in 1998 the Department of Emergencies and police jointly quarantined the village of Zartok in response to a cholera outbreak. The National Preparedness Plan also includes provisions for banning public events and disinfecting the public transportation system.

COMMENT

14. (C) There is no effective AI surveillance system in Armenia and the GOAM currently lacks the capacity to accurately diagnose potential AI cases. Armenia needs immediate assistance to increase surveillance and diagnostic capacity and to provide flu vaccines for at-risk populations. Should there be an outbreak, Armenia will likely need international assistance to isolate the disease, cull flocks and compensate farmers. Despite a serious lack of financial resources, Armenia does have basic laboratory equipment and a group of scientists with technical expertise who could be trained to diagnose AI cases. The GOAM is also a willing partner and is likely to cooperate with the international community in responding to this threat.
EVANS